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BUILDING A BACKGROUND FOR BUSINESS ENGLISH

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The task is not, properly speaking, a question of teaching business English, but a question of teaching the English of the business man. This difference may be drawn because the style of his English is closely bound with the spirit characteristic of his business. Because of this intimate relation, we may safely seek our background in the task of acquainting ourselves with the spirit which dominates business. The moving force vitalizing business marks the language of business, and this moving force is to be found in the new ideal "Business is service." The old days of "Business is business" have passed away. It is a far cry from the rule of *Caveat emptor* to the new rule which holds the patron always right. Brave indeed were the merchants who first advanced the theory that the sale is not complete merely because the customer has the goods and the merchant has the money, but that the transaction must be accompanied by lasting pleasure and a cordial feeling. Business succeeds in just so far as it serves. This attitude colors every letter written, creeps through each morning's mail, and finds expression in every written communication. Back of the letter stands the ideal. Through the typewriter ribbon flashes the message of a kindly good will and an insistent desire to serve well and faithfully. Take away the actuating ideal and the words become lifeless marks, with the letter reverting to the old days of cold formality. The letter is an outward expression of the inward condition; the two are unyieldingly bound together.

Just as a modern business cherishes certain standards of service and instils these standards into the heart and mind of the new employee, so must the teacher saturate the minds of his pupils with the spirit of modern business before he can teach them the message

of modern business. To know the notions of the new class concerning business ethics is important. Usually their code is that of the corner grocery, the neighborhood drugstore, not the code, in a majority of cases, representative of the kind of business people you want them to be. Father and older brother or sister discuss the problems of the day's work around the dinner table, but as a rule they do not present "down town" in the most desirable light possible. Too often the experience is that of the man who sees only the cogs and not an entire machine. When the horizon is bounded by the task immediately at hand, when the whole is lost in the monotony of a detail, the attitude is in too many cases unwholesome. From such sources the pupil is taught a misconceived spirit of business. With this background he enters the class in business English. He cannot be taught the English of the business man because he will force the message through an unfair conception. Just as the spirit of the letter determines the language, and the traditions and customs of a particular industry stamp its communications, so the spirit of business held by the pupil will manifest itself in the work he does in class. The old ideals ruling, the old forms result. Every teacher is familiar with the first letters written by a class, letters filled with a "We regret that this is our policy, but it cannot be changed" sort of spirit, and marked by a free use of conventionalized phrases and studied expressions. The teacher proceeds to rule these phrases out and to bring in the new freedom of the letter as it is written today, but in too many cases he finds the task almost impossible. The letters lack sincerity and earnestness. But how can sincerity and earnestness appear in the letter as long as the pupil believes that such qualities are not found in business?

The next step is to change the ideals of the class. If we believe that the spirit and the letter march hand-in-hand, we will believe that it is easier to teach the English of the business man if first we teach the spirit of business. Given the proper mental attitude, and the teacher will act only as a check, will guide and control lest the expression of the new attitude be too extravagant. Place back of the class the "will to serve" ideal, and the technique of the letter will just about take care of itself. The growth of the letter through

a sincere desire on the part of the pupil to serve in a most effective way will be so natural that the letter will stand out unfettered by the conventionalizing hindrances of the past.

One of the best methods of replacing the old ideal with the new is through a reading of business books. Business literature has increased greatly, both in quantity and quality, during the past few years, and nowhere is the present-day ideal of business better exemplified than in its books. They follow broad lines of thought, stimulate healthy ethics, and, what is equally important for the teacher, are readable and interesting. My classes read a book each month and prepare a rather elaborate review of each book read. Four or five days are spent in presenting these reviews, and each pupil feels the responsibility of presenting to the class the broad basis of business service upon which the book is built. I know of no method so effective as this. Pupils preach the lessons of fairness and courtesy, and display business as a big game played according to the squarest of rules.

Five Hundred Business Books, a list adequately described by its title, may be secured from the American Library Association, 78 E. Washington Street, Chicago. This list classifies the books under such heads as, "Commerce," "Finance," "Office Practice," and "Advertising," gives the name of the author, the publication date, the publisher, and a short description of the book. A much more comprehensive publication is *2400 Business Books and Guide to Business Literature*, published by H. W. Wilson Company, New York. The price of this book is five dollars. It is the most complete publication of its kind on the market, but perhaps the smaller book would serve the average teacher just as well.

During the past three or four semesters, my classes have expressed a preference for the following books: Fowler, N. C., *How To Get Your Pay Raised* (McClurg); Maxwell, W. M., *If I Were Twenty-One* (Lippincott); Brisco, N. A., *Fundamentals of Salesmanship* (Appleton); Hall, S. R., *Short Talks on Retail Selling* (Funk); Lewis, E. S., *Getting the Most Out of Business* (Ronald); Purinton, E. E., *Personal Efficiency in Business* (McBride); "System," *The Knack of Selling* (Shaw); Fisk, J. W., *Retail Selling* (Harper); Marden, O. S., *Everybody Ahead* (Morrison).

This list illustrates the sort of book that pupils turn to, read with interest, and discuss in class. It is a representative list, and makes no pretension to completeness. Turn your class into a business library, and they will read books of this type, books dealing with selling, office management, and retail store management.

A most valuable use may be made of the business magazine. The magazine has an advantage over the business book in that it is illustrated, and that the articles deal with current factors. *System*, of course, is invaluable. Then there is *Printer's Ink*, both the monthly publication and the weekly issue. *Forbes* is a magazine built along inspirational lines, and contains many stories of industrial leaders. It reflects fairly well the thought of what is known as "big business." *The Nation's Business*, published by the United States Chamber of Commerce, is well illustrated, reviews current conditions, and deals with the larger phases of business procedure. *The Mail Bag* is devoted to direct advertising as is also *Postage Business*, published by the Burroughs Adding Machine Company, tells interesting stories of new and successful methods.

Such an array of magazines places before the class a most convenient avenue to the understanding of business ways. A good method is to assign certain articles for review before the class. This need not be a formal assignment, but a suggestion that will lead the class through interest and curiosity to read the article. But, as a rule, the pupils read the magazines eagerly, for they feel that the magazines treat of the fundamental elements of business, the stuff from which they must work out their future success.

Another type of magazine which may be profitably used is the house organ. House organs are divided into two classes: those which circulate among the employees and are given over to plant gossip and news, and those which circulate among customers as sales mediums. A letter addressed to the advertising manager of the plant whose house organ you wish to secure, explaining why you wish it, will be kindly received and your name will be placed upon the mailing list. I prefer to secure the publications of local industries because they contain a local, community note of interest to

the pupils. It is a good plan to build a little magazine rack in the classroom in which to put the house organs; all is optional and voluntary. No assignments are made. The pupils take them home as they wish and bring them back as they wish. But because the pupils feel that the house organ is the authentic mouthpiece of a firm for whom they may work, they welcome the opportunity to read it.

The teacher who is unfamiliar with this type of magazine may secure much information from the copies of *Printer's Ink* published during the month of January, 1921. Here will be found a list of more than six hundred house organs. The teacher may desire to select a list of house organs according to the nature of the home industry. For example, my people are interested in automobiles, not only those made in Indianapolis, but in all lines. Interest concentrates when the house organs represent local lines of industry.

Still another effective medium that may be used to impress the thoughts and language of business is the business story which appears occasionally in the popular magazines. The *Saturday Evening Post* publishes a considerable number of such stories dealing, in many cases, with sales and advertising problems. The *American Magazine*, designed to appeal to alert young business people, publishes many business stories. When pupils appreciate the stories, they suggest certain stories to the teacher and ask that he mention them to the class so that the others may have the opportunity of reading them.

A year or two of watching will enable the teacher to build a list of novels accessible to the pupils which deal with business problems. Such authors as Edna Ferber, Frank Norris, Ernest Poole, and Booth Tarkington write many of this type. This sort of reading is especially valuable to the pupil, because it lifts the horizons of his business world and stimulates his imagination so that he glimpses new business possibilities.

It is through this reading that the class constructs a new background, against which may be taught the technical details. Here they learn the new story from the mouths of business men themselves. The message rings clear and true because it comes directly

to them from its source. The mind is so filled with the new that the old is crowded out.

The teacher will do much to change the attitude if he himself secures the viewpoint, the manner, and the plan-method of the business man. An excellent way to do this is to place himself in such a position that he will be thrown into contact with business men. Civic and community work offers opportunities to work, as an equal, with the business man. Church work, where committees plan methods and ways, gives the teacher a direct contact. No opportunity is to be neglected or considered too trivial, if the teacher earnestly wishes to carry to his classes through his own personality the attitude of business. An ideal way is to work in an office for a summer or two. There are many lines wherein a teacher may find a pleasant summer's employment. Such an experience gives to a teacher a new confidence, because he feels that now he can talk to his classes, not alone as a theorist, but as one who knows because he has himself accomplished. When such an experience is not possible, then the teacher should adopt the next best method, and throw himself into frequent and intimate contact with business people.

One negative suggestion remains. Do not spend too great an amount of time and energy teaching pupils to become "correspondents." Teachers assume that many men occupy important positions because of an ability to dictate letters. We visit a friend at his office and we are told that he is dictating. The stories show us the business man in a constant rush to "clear his desk of letters." The textbooks hold forth the alluring possibilities to be reached by becoming a "correspondent." The teacher absorbs this material and so allows it to color his class work that an attempt is made to reach the "correspondent" goal. He is eager to stress practical ends and hence allows this idea to assume a position of undue importance, a position entirely out of keeping with its actual place in business organization.

Regarding this conception of "business correspondent," Mr. L. A. McQueen of the B. F. Goodrich Rubber Company says:

I doubt if there could be such a vocation as "business correspondent" in the average large company. In our organization a man termed "correspon-

dent" goes for a week and probably writes only ten or twelve letters. The average letter-writer watches production, looks after follow-up work, studies advertising, watches deliveries from branches, and many other things not closely connected with letter writing.

If the "correspondent" ideal motivates the work of the teacher, the danger of a too technical study of the various forms of letters enters. Many of these forms will never be used by the pupil, and to learn them thoroughly requires much time and work. A wrong conception of the term "correspondent" may easily lead to an emphasis and a prediction which is not in keeping with actual practices.